CRITICALLY ONTOLOGIZING THE NATION: ULADZIMIR KARATKIEVICH'S ZYAMLYA PAD BYELYMI KRYLAMI

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Abstract. Uladzimir Karatkievich's long essay *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* (1972/1977) tries to teach its readers about the Belarusian nation. In the following, it shall be posited that this teaching can best be understood as enacting *critical ontologization* — a mode of developing potential for critical thinking out of identifying oneself with the essence of a national past. This concept is taken from a reading of Frantz Fanon's idea of a *national culture* as formulated in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Here, Fanon envisions a mode of locating oneself within a national history that opens up critical potential in the present — it is the core postulate of this text that *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* follows a similar model. The main part of the article will make this argument productive; in a close reading of Karatkievich's essay, several of the key aspects of the text will be discussed in this context: the relation established between the text's narrator and his listeners, the way in which the text positions Belarus as all-encompassing, and the way in which such a positioning opens up critical possibilities for interrogating the relationship between Belarus and its place in Soviet discourse. The aim of such an operation is to demonstrate how in *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* two apparently contradictory tendencies become the same: an authoritarian way of national writing that identifies a national essence within its reader — and a critical impetus to empower the reader to break his present and create something new.

Keywords: nation, ontologization, Belarus, Karatkievich, Soviet literature.

Introduction

Uladzimir Karatkievich's 1972 work *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* ("The Land Beneath White Wings") is a peculiar text. The nearly two hundred pages of the long essay meander through a whole number of aspects of what one could name the "Belarusian identity": Belarusians' day-to-day life, their customs and looks, their cities, towns and villages, their language and their history, their nature and their literature. Historiographical parts evolve into anecdotes given in the language of fiction, melancholic contemplations about modern life alternate with meditations on the trans-historical character of all things Belarusian. And all of that is told in a specific tone, the tone of a pedagogue speaking to a student audience — the narrator addresses "girls and boys"[1] right in the second paragraph of the book. The book is a teacher's monologue; his audience should learn something.

Originally written in 1972 for Ukrainian school students as an introductory work about their neighbors in Belarus — and therefore also first published in Ukrainian — Karatkievich later decided to heavily edit it and also publish the book in Belarusian, now apparently with a different aim. As one of Karatkievich's editors, a certain L. Mazanik, puts it in his notes for the 1990 republication of the essay in volume eight of Karatkievich's *Zbor Tvorau* ("Collected Works"): "The Belarusian version of the book is a fully new edition. It differs in its more fundamental treatment of the history of the Belarusian lands, their culture, language, and literature".[2] So now, the text does not want to teach Ukrainian students about a foreign country, but to give *Belarusian* students a *fundamental* lesson about *their own country*. This is a very specific task — one that is not self-explanatory. Why should there be a need to teach young Belarusians such things? Shouldn't they already know them? Why rely on a text originally written for students in another country — even a rewritten one — to do so? What, then, is the point of *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami*?

These are the questions I will attempt to address. Therefore, I will read *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* as engaging in a form of *critical ontologization* – an attempt to formulate a national essentialism that, in turn, empowers the student audience to creatively articulate their own essence in opposition to the Soviet historical narrative that situates

1 "дзяўчаты і хлопцы" (Karatkievich 1990: 383). All translations from the Belarusian are mine. — J. W.

2 "Беларускае выданне кнігі — гэта новая яе рэдакцыя. Адрозніваецца больш грунтоўным даследаваннем гісторыі беларускай зямлі, яе культуры, мовы, літаратуры" (Mazanik 1990: 588).

and seeks to determine them. To explain how such a mode of ontologizing history with a critical aim might work, I will first take a very brief look at Frantz Fanon's idea of *national culture* which prototypically defines the *ontologization* of such a culture as opening up critical potential. The central claim of this text is that Karatkievich's essay can be productively read as embodying a particular idea of national culture: one that essentializes the nation's members and their connection to national history, but does not confine them within its boundaries. Instead, it seeks to empower them to write their own essence. Ontologization becomes the possibility for thinking anew — a critical mode of placing oneself in history. In the main part of this article, I will then make this category productive. A close reading of *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* will focus on three key aspects of the text: first, the narrative situation it establishes between the narrator and his listeners; second, the way the text positions Belarus as an all-encompassing totality; and third, how this positioning opens up critical possibilities for interrogating the relationship between Belarus and its place within Soviet discourse.

Critical Ontologization: Frantz Fanon's Idea of a National Culture

In his most influential work of political writing, *The Wretched of the Earth*, first published in 1961, the Martiniquan-French-Algerian revolutionary writer and anti-colonial activist Frantz Fanon, among other things, searches for an idea of what the proper task of "national culture" in the context of the decolonial struggles of his time might be. He arrives at the following conclusion:

> We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. [...] A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence (Fanon 1971: 188).

National culture, to put it in different words, is *not* about being authentic about the past, not about writing a coherent "true" history

or the people's "true nature" — no: it is about re-attaining a past for the present, about giving oneself a new past, a second nature built upon the moment when "the people has created itself". Thus, for Fanon in the early 1960s, there exists a vision of a *critical* national culture that could develop a position on the present by returning to *national founding moments* – or by even creating them anew. Here, potentials that remained unfulfilled in history become visible through a return to another historical point.[3]

This statement is crucial for the following analysis of Karatkievich's *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami*, as it provides a positive, critical dimension to one of the central findings of post-colonial *nation studies* – particularly influential in the Belarusian context: the recognition that nations are not ancient and ever-existing entities, but historically recent phenomena that are created, constructed, and *invented*. In his famous study *Imagined Communities* from 1983, the American political scientist Benedict Anderson puts this in a laconic formula: "The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their antiquity in the eye of nationalists" (Anderson 1991: 5). The Belarusian philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich, an attentive reader of Anderson's texts, adapts this statement to the Belarusian case, establishing a slightly different formula in his heavily influential text *Kod adsutnasti* ("The Code of Absence") from 2007: "The nation is nothing real, but since it exists and has been happening, it is looking for ways of becoming tangible in reality".[4] With this statement, Akudovich posits the nation as embodying a double nature: it is not real, but it is always there. It is a calling, an ontological feature of the world that is *itself* searching for ways to become real. Where to Anderson the nation is *invented*, to Akudovich it is *inventing itself*.

3 It should be acknowledged that turning directly to Fanon may initially seem like a stretch. Nevertheless, this article posits that there are meaningful moments of symmetry between Fanon's theory and Karatkievich's writing — symmetries that will, hopefully, become evident in the course of the analysis. These parallels may be conditioned by a generational affinity: both Karatkievich and Fanon began to conceptualize the nation within the concrete conditions of the post–World War II world, a world that had not shed its colonial structure despite the victory over fascism. Both authors produced their first major works in the 1950s. Their thought developed under conditions of *coloniality*, rather than *post-coloniality* — in contrast to other thinkers discussed in this article, such as Benedict Anderson and Valiantsin Akudovich, for whom the post-colonial world is a far more concrete reality. On the non-identity between Fanon's thinking and later post-colonial theory, cf. Macey, 2012, esp. p. 24–28.

4 "Нацыя не ёсць нечым рэальным, але паколькі яна ёсць, адбылася, дык шукае спосабы, каб нейкім чынам уцялесніцца ў рэальнае" (Akudovich 2007: 10).

Both of those ideas ultimately fall short when compared to the concept of national culture found in Fanon's work: to Fanon, the nation is a critical political practice, one that does not have to "delv[e] into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm" — it only has a right to exist if it is confronting the "ever-present reality of the people" (Fanon 1971: 188). When it returns to the past, to the national founding moments, it does so to free the present: to unlock in confrontation with the past a source of energy for the struggle in the now. For Fanon, there *is* indeed a relationship between a nation's present and its past — but it is not grounded in the invocation of some preexisting ontological essence beneath the present. On the contrary, the ontological link between past and present is forged in the present itself, in order to make space for the struggles of the now. The present and the past share an essence only insofar as the past can be put to work for making the present free. Henceforth, one *should* write stories about one's own national past, and one *can* write of an inner connection between this present and the past. But one shouldn't do so for the sake of the past — only for that of the present. There exists no real ontological connection between present and past; what can exist, though, is an *ontologized* idea of the past, one that finds in the past an essence to be made productive in the present. To use another one of Fanon's phrases: "No one can truly wish for the spread of African culture if he does not give practical support to the creation of the conditions necessary to the existence of the culture; in other words, to the liberation of the whole continent" (Fanon 1971: 189). It *is* possible — and perhaps even necessary — to formulate a national culture, but it must be one that cracks up the unfree present.

In the following, I will demonstrate how reading a text like *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* with this kind of critical ontology as an analytical tool can be very productive. A close reading of the text will show how it uses a certain narrative strategy to make the nation a critical category for its listeners — one that finally gives them the power to break from their Soviet present.

Zyamlya Pad Byelymi Krylami: Narrating the Nation

It is not easy to place Uladzimir Karatkievich's long essay *Zyamlya pad byelymi krylami* (hereafter *Zyamlya*) within a clear genre category. Is it a piece of history writing? Is it an educational book, written to teach an unknowing youth about their forgotten national heritage — as at

least the author's introduction suggests, where he sets out this purpose and closes with an exclamation of "Let's go, folks!"[5]? Or is it more a piece of self-analysis, in which the narrator (not necessarily the author) attempts to place *himself* within national Belarusian history, thereby carefully (re-)inventing that very history? It is the last mode of inventing a national narrative *for himself* which the post-Soviet writer Alhierd Bacharevich identifies as the major factor of the *earlier* Karatkievich's literature:

> The young Karatkievich had to create his own Belarus — with its history and its myths. To read it between the lines of others' stories. To see it where, in place of history, there seemed to be only a no-man's-land paved over with concrete. To imagine it. To write it. To invent it.[6]

Zyamlya is *not* a work of the *young* Karatkievich; in it, we hear the voice of an author who has already written most of his major works of fiction, including historical novels like *Dzikaye palyavannye karalya Stacha* ("King Stakh's Wild Hunt", 1958), *Kalasy pad syarpom tvaim* ("Grain Beneath Your Sickle", 1965), or *Chrystos pryzyamliusya u Harodni* ("Christ Has Landed in Harodnia", 1966). So, in *Zyamlya*, we read an author who has already mastered the genre of the big historical epos and has written several works that were instrumental for creating a new romantic image of the Belarusian nation[7] — Valiantsin Akudovich called it a "translation of Adam Mickiewicz's Belarus into Belarusian"[8]. In this way, Karatkievich had opened up new perspectives for looking at the Belarusian past. The scholar Simon Lewis posits that Karatkievich's image of the old Belarus found in those novels does "not impose [Karatkievich's] own version of the Belarusian past, but invites readers to partake in his fiction and thereby to imagine it for themselves"

5 "У дарогу, сябры!" (Karatkievich 1990: 385).

6 "Маладому Караткевічу сваю Беларусь зь яе гісторыяй і яе мітам трэбы было стварыць. Вычытаць між чужых радкоў. Убачыць там, дзе замест гісторыі, здавалася, было закатанае ў бэтон нічыйнае поле. Уявіць. Напісаць. Прыдумаць" (Bacharevich 2012: 382).

7 An image that, as Elena Gapova notes, found particular popularity in the 1960s due to the process of heavy urbanization in the BSSR — where new social conditions created a generalized search for new ways of belonging. In Gapova's pointed words: "Karatkevich provided guidance to a generation of uprooted villagers turned into art historians or ethnologists, who had a collective sense of ambivalence regarding their life course" (Gapova 2018: 193).

8 "[…] Уладзіміра Караткевіча […] уся творчасць якога, у пэўным сэнсе, ёсць адмысловым перакладам Міцкевіча ўжо на беларускую мову" (Akudovich 1991: 80).

(Lewis 2019: 127). This statement echoes a viewpoint present in the broad Belarusian discourse on Karatkievich, e.g. by Karatkievich's biographer Anatol Verabei, who states that Karatkievich "did not copy historical events and facts with scientific accuracy, but created an artistic chronicle of his homeland".[9] As Adam Mal'dzis formulates it — and he is by far not the only one to bring up these names: "In Belarus, Uladzimir Karatkievich fulfilled the same historical mission as Henrik Sienkiewicz in Poland, Alois Jirásek in Czechia, and Walter Scott in England".[10] Karatkievich wrote *novels*, not history books, novels that opened up the question of the past and painted some possible answers to that question — but novels that were clearly fiction, to be read and encountered as such.

Still, those fictional texts were not purely defined by their openness. Especially a text like *Kalasy pad syarpom tvaim* marked out several new focal points that became very influential for any nationalist reading of Belarusian history — the most important one being the establishment of Kastus Kalinouski and the 1863–1864 uprising co-lead by him[11], one of Karatkievich's "primary fascinations" (Lewis 2019: 113), as major orientation points for a rekindled national memory canon. Kalinouski through Karatkievich's fiction was "let [...] into the official history writing" (Astrouskaya 2019: 103–104). He had left his mark on the national historical *imaginarium* — in fiction and through fiction. So, it seems justified to ask what Karatkievich does in *Zyamlya*, using a form quite different in style and aim from his fiction, a way more directly pedagogical form — when it earlier had been his fiction that could have such a profound effect.

In the following, it shall be posited that *Zyamlya* is written in such a way because in it the ontologization of national history that was already *a* factor in Karatkievich's earlier works culminates: it becomes

9 "Ён [...] не капіраваў з навуковай дакладнасцю гістарычныя падзеі і факты, а стварaў мастацкі летапіс роднай зямлі" (Verabei 2020: 13).

10 "Уладзімір Караткевіч выканаў у Беларусі тую ж гістарычную місію, што Генрык Сянкевіч у Польшчы, Алоіс Ірасек у Чэхіі, Вальтер Скот у Англіі" (Mal'dzis 2000: 36). Exactly the same collection of names can be found in Verabei 2005: 3 — so this is an established way of reflecting on Karatkievich's role for the national canon.

11 Kalinouski, the historical figure, was one of the leaders of the 1863–1864 uprising against Tsarist power in the "Northwestern territories" of the Russian Empire (an event referred to as the "Polish uprising" in Russian discourse or the "January uprising" in Polish discourse). He was the author of several pamphlets in Belarusian written for propagandizing the peasant population of the territories, the so-called Muzhytskaya prawda ("Peasants' Truth"). After the failure of the uprising, he was publicly executed in Vilnius in 1864 (for a historical overview on Kalinouski and the uprising, cf. Bich, 2013).

the dominating key to his writing. What was merely posited as a possibility in the earlier works of fiction becomes all-encompassing in *Zyamlya*; Belarus becomes a national *totality* in that everything is interconnected. The birds in the sky and the people in the factory, the flowers in the fields and the dialects spoken in the streets, the old ruins of long-lost empires and the fresh bones of forest partisans, literatures of all times and anyone who has ever grabbed a weapon — everything is read as exemplifying Belarusian-ness. This ontologization — as shall be demonstrated — turns history onto its head: it *only* has a place for the existence of Soviet power when considered in the context of *national history*, as one of the stages of such a history. Thus, the essay shifts the burden of proof onto Karatkievich's present — the present must prove itself against this nationalized backdrop. Herein, we can discern a fairly clear (though unconscious, of course) reflection of the critical mode of nationalizing history analyzed by Fanon — Belarus becomes a historical totality that has *something else* to say about every moment of the past. To work through this, I will examine three aspects of the text:

1. How does the narrator model himself in relation to a young audience?
2. How does the text represent Belarus as an all-encompassing national totality?
3. How does it situate Soviet history in relation to that totality?

The Narrator's Opening Words: Preaching the Past

The narrator begins his monologue with the aforementioned introductory prologue, directed at a clearly defined audience[12]: Belarusian youth, specifically members of the generation that grew up after the end of World War II. This is important because, for the narrator, the war marked a turning point in his own biography — he had to learn about Belarus anew after the fighting had stopped:

> It came to be that I only truly got to know Belarus at your age. It had been there "before the war", but then was forgotten during the war. Bombings, sieges, the evacuation. Moscow in October 1941, the Ural Mountains, Kazakhstan, the Orenburg steppes. And then the ruins of Minsk and of my hometown, Orsha, the forests by the roadside cut down by the occupiers (out of fear of the partisans), the graves of killed people. From there on, everything began to be written down anew,

12 This article will only refer to the 1977 Belarusian version of *Zyamlya*.

as if on a clean page. My love for Belarus was born in the hungriest, coldest and most difficult of times. And maybe because of that it grew especially strong.[13]

Karatkievich's narrator already at the very beginning of the essay locates the essay's contents as learnings of the post-war period. There is *no* direct connection to the old Belarus, all that the narrator wishes to present was conceived, conceptualized, and written *after* the war. This, in itself, is already an interesting statement, as it attributes a somewhat constitutive role to World War II in the formation of Belarusian national consciousness — but not in the common way of framing postwar Belarus as a "Partisan Republic" (Lewis 2017). Quite the opposite: here, Belarus becomes a free playing field for a narrative agent seeking material to write about. The war is positioned as a disruptive force, and the destruction of the Belarusian landscape in its wake allows for a new, "especially strong" love toward Belarus. In such an emptied discursive field, the conscious narrator wields clear authority — he can remake the object of his love, and what he declares becomes the truth of that object. The narrator positions himself as the patriot *per se*, as the embodiment of a love to the Belarusian nation willed into the world out of nothingness. He can love Belarus even where it doesn't exist — or at least, he wants us to believe this. It is this love that speaks through him; his monologue becomes the nation's monologue.

This is an extraordinarily authoritarian posture, in the most direct sense of the word: the *author* holds all the power. Yet this posture is immediately complicated when the narrating voice positions itself concretely in relation to its listeners — the Belarusian youth. Rather than emphasizing differences between narrator and audience, it highlights what they share in common:

You and I are children of the same history, the same present, and a shared future. We are united by a common fate — even in the "important little things".

13 "Здарылася так, што я пачаў па-сапраўднаму пазнаваць Беларусь толькі ў вашым узросце. Яна была "да вайны", і за час вайны моцна забылася. Бамбёжкі, акружэнні, эвакуацыя. Масква ў кастрычніку 1941 года, горы Урала, Казахстан, Арэнбургскія стэпы. А пасля руіны Мінска і роднае мне Оршы, высечаныя ля дарог акупантамі (ад жаху перад партызанамі) лясы, пераховы забітых людзей. Так усё і пачало запісвацца зноў, нібыта на чыстай дошцы. Любоў да Беларусі нараджалася ў самыя галодныя, халодныя і цяжкія часы. І, магчыма, таму стала асабліва моцная" (Karatkyevich 1990: 384).

> The only difference between me and you is that I am about thirty years older and have therefore seen a bit more. If you live to my age, you might end up far more experienced. But for now, I want to help you a little with your first steps — to give you the key to our home, so that from there on, you can begin to find your own way in it.[14]

The narrator marks an *identity* between himself and his young audience. They are the same — even in the smallest details. It seems like the narrating voice, after just having pumped up itself a little earlier, is now playing itself down again: I'm no more than you, I might just be a little older — a demonstrative gesture of anti-authoritarianism. The narrator even makes it clear that his wisdom might not be the highest stage of wisdom ever written down — his listeners, his students might someday surpass him. The borders between teacher and students seem to not be fully stable, open to reversal in an undefined future.

However, taken seriously, this demonstrative anti-authoritarian gesture also carries a different meaning: it opens up the possibility for the narrator's voice to become the voice of the youth to whom he speaks. Both sides of the equation, teacher and students, are "children of the same history", and therefore, they are "united", even "in the 'important little things'". By the power of the nation that speaks through the narrator they are one: the narrator knows more about his audience than that audience can know about itself. In this view, they are similar down to the core: the history that the narrator has reconstructed as *his own* out of the ruins of the world war — it is also his students' very own, essential history. *He owns the key to their house*. In the present, they know *nothing*, he knows *everything* (and he has created everything). He can say so because he knows of their *authentic essence* – because it is also *his essence*. Both narrator and listener, teacher and pupils, are fruits of the same national tree, a tree that the narrator, after the war, could re-plant in an empty field. Thus, in the figure of the narrator, past and present converge: his knowledge, on the one hand, reaches back deep into past centuries, is the distilled knowledge of the nation — while, on the other hand, it could only develop in this form at his

14 "Мы з вамі дзеці адной гісторыі, аднолькавай сучаснасці і агульнай будучыні. Нас яднае агульны лёс. Нават у "важлівых дробязях".
Уся розніца паміж мною і вамі ў тым, што я на нейкія трыццаць год старэйшы за вас і таму крыху болей бачыў. Дажывяце да майго — можа, будзеце куды больш бывалыя. А пакуль што я хачу трошкі памагчы вам у вашых першых кроках, даць вам ключ ад нашага дома, каб далей вы ўжо асвойваліся ў ім самі" (Karatkievich 1990: 384).

concrete historical moment. From this perspective, the borders between teacher and student are very stable — indeed, necessary.

It should be understood in this same vein when the narrator beseeches his listeners to take his words seriously — though it may not sound so, every word he speaks is his and their full, authentic truth, of which he is the arbiter:

> This will be a book written by a witness who has seen much (regarding the present) with his own eyes. And I would very much like you to believe me, even if I begin to tell you the most extraordinary things. Because life is richer than we imagine. Life sometimes resembles a fairy tale so much that one cannot help but exclaim: "This can't be true!"[15]

When Karatkievich's narrator speaks of Belarus, then he speaks the truth; not only an individual, but a collective truth. And even when one doesn't want to believe him, one still should, even if it sounds like a "fairy tale". The anti-authoritarian figure becomes its own opposite: the teacher-student relationship transforms into one more akin to that between a priest and a believer. Like a preacher, Karatkievich's narrator has a special connection to the one, higher truth: the collective truth and his personal truth are identical. In his words, we meet the *real* Belarus — the work following this opening statement is to be read as translating *national essence* into an *authentic* written text. His students might aspire to become something, yes — but what they can become is predetermined by their national background. They may surpass their teacher, but only insofar as they *become like him*. The education the narrator offers demands identification — it requires his listeners to really accept their national truth as *their* own. The truth of the pedagogue is a monological, monolithic truth. In this respect, *Zyamlya* differs significantly from the openness found in Karatkievich's works of fiction.

To summarize: in the prologue of *Zyamlya*, the narrator asserts the existence of a national essence shared by all members of the nation. He has special access to this ontology because of his biographical position as someone coming of age in the aftermath of World War II, when Belarus presented itself to him as a clean slate. Now, he seeks to teach

15 "Гэта будзе кніга, напісаная сведкам, які многае (што датычыць сучаснасці) бачыў на ўласныя вочы. І я дужа хацеў бы, каб вы мне верылі, нават калі я стану вам расказваць самыя незвычайныя рэчы. Таму што жыццё багацейшае, чым мы яго ўяўляем. Жыццё часам бывае настолькі падобнае на казку, што нельга не ўскрыкнуць: «Ды не можа гэтага быць!»" (Karatkievich 1990: 385)

a new generation about this truth — and they should listen to him, for it is their very own truth that he speaks. The book, right from its opening paragraphs, establishes a distinct claim to national *truth* and *authenticity*, while simultaneously presenting this truth and authenticity as *constructed* by the narrator — an apparent contradiction. The teacher wants the student to become something, but that something is identical to the teacher himself. Can this contradiction be resolved? We shall see in the following analysis.

Belarus: An All-Encompassing Totality

How is authentic Belarus constructed in the text? How does its status as the truth of everything within its boundaries move beyond mere declarations by the narrator? How will he prove it? The text employs a specific strategy of portraying Belarus as an all-encompassing totality. After the prologue, it begins with the most ahistorical elements of what might be called "Belarusian existence" and gradually introduces history — implying that history serves as an example of the ahistorical. Concretely, this means the text, in broad strokes, moves from a description of the country's physical geography — its lakes, rivers, and forests — through an account of the immediate rural life of Belarusian peasants, then to a depiction of the "human geography" of cities and towns, and only afterward embarks on a relatively long recapitulation of Belarusian history. It ends in the present — but that explicit present (a chapter called "Today"[16]) just makes up for seven of the nearly two-hundred pages of the text. Thus, the movement of the text could be described as one from the constant to the fleeting, from the everlasting to the momentary. Herein lies the key to its ontologization of Belarus: the concrete Belarus of the present is treated as just one tiny example of a transhistorical entity.

The first chapter after the prologue — "My Belarusian Land"[17] — begins with the war, recalling the uncanny fact that in the post-war period, a common hiker in the Belarusian woods will repeatedly encounter signs of the military conflict: obelisks bearing the names of the deceased and murdered. We are confronted with the staggering reality that every fourth fourth inhabitant of the BSSR perished during the war. This episode then leads into a recounting of Belarus's status as a "Partisan Nation", celebrating the heroic efforts of the Belarusian people in achieving victory in World War II:

16 "Сённяшні дзень" (Karatkievich 1990: 564).

17 "Зямля мая беларуская" (Karatkievich 1990: 385).

> And when it comes to those who sympathized, gathered information, procured medicine, food, and other supplies — when we talk about the so-called "partisan reserve" — then almost the entire people can confidently be counted among the partisans.[18]

But this sad, uncanny, and patriotic episode is then — perhaps symbolizing the clean slate the author claimed for himself after the war — immediately followed by a detailed, technical description of Belarus as a territorial entity:

> Our Belarus occupies 207.6 thousand square kilometers, or 0.9% of the territory of the USSR, but this is larger than Bulgaria, larger than Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Portugal, Greece, and larger than Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Luxembourg combined. [...] It borders Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, and occupies a favorable geographic position on the routes from Western Europe to the East and from Ukraine to the Baltics.[19]

The text moves from a portrayal of an emptied, war-torn, yet heroic country to a technical description of that very country — as if the narrator were a painter who has now established his canvas. From the opening statement, we understand that this canvas, his canvas, is where the truth of his listeners resides. He reinforces this fact through an authoritarian authorial gesture, declaring the described place as entirely his own: "Someone once said that the shape of our county reminds him of that of an oak leaf. I don't like this comparison. To me, it looks more like a bison".[20] The shape of Belarus which the author meets in his *present*, the BSSR after World War II, gets injected with a certain metaphysical meaning by the author, more accurate than the commonly used one: only the narrator sees Belarus correctly, and he

18 А калі ўжо казаць пра тых, хто спачуваў, збіраў звесткі, здабываў медыкаменты, ежу і іншае, калі гаварыць пра так званы "партызанскі рэзерв", то ў лік партызан смела можна залічыць ледзь не ўвесь народ (Karatkievich 1990: 386).

19 Наша Беларусь займае 207,6 тысячы квадратных кіламетраў, ці 0,9% тэрыторыі СССР, але гэта больш чым Балгарыя, больш чым ЧССР, чым Венгрыя, чым Партугалія, Грэцыя, і больш чым Бельгія, Галандыя, Данія і Люксембург, разам узятыя. [...] Мяжуе яна з Украінай, Расіяй, Латвіяй, Літвою і Польшчай і займае выгоднае геаграфічнае становішча на шляхах з Заходняй Еўропы на Усход і з Украіны ў Прыбалтыку (Karatkievich 1990: 386–387).

20 ...Нехта сказаў, што па абрысах наша краіна нагадвае дубовы ліст. Па-мойму, параўнанне не вельмі. На мой погляд яна па абрысах хутчэй нагадвае зубра (Karatkievich 1990: 387).

sees a bison, mighty and able to defend itself, but peaceful. Belarus has been defined: it can stand its ground, it is home to good and brave people, it is quite large. But it is also empty — it must be described, taught its own meaning, transformed from an oak leaf into a bison. This is the task the narrator sets for himself: *to recreate, within this emptiness, what ostensibly already fills it*. He has "207.6 thousand square kilometers" to paint on — and he gets to work immediately.

The first chapters are dedicated to the different regions of Belarus: the text defines five such regions, the Lake District, the Center, the Neman region, the East, and the South (or: Polesia) — while also stating that, actually, there is one more region, the lands around the Dnyapro river, or Prydnyaproye, Karatkievich's home region which he finds especially important, as witnessed by his novel *Kalasy pad siarpom tvaim*, where the region is treated as a stand-in for Belarus as a whole. For all of those regions, the narrator describes the landscape, finds quite poetic words for each region's flora and fauna, full of maximalist declarations of his own love: "And, most importantly, [here we find] wideness as nowhere else on planet Earth".[21] The bison on the map, Belarus, is filled with immovable, eternal beauty beyond history; the historical is fleeting against such a backdrop.

When the text starts to describe the human life on this land, the narrator feels the need to warn his listeners: what they are about to read does not have the same self-evident quality as the landscapes of the country; still, it has a defining worth for any Belarusian:

> Let us now turn to the village, the house, the human. But I want to warn you that this will be more of an ethnographic conversation — that much has changed, that traditional clothing is not worn everywhere, but only in certain places, on islands in Palessia, in the Hrodna region or the Prydnyaproye, and that housewives now bake bread themselves only rarely, and so on.
> I will talk about the typical, about what distinguishes the everyday life of a Belarusian from that of, say, a Georgian or a Ukrainian.[22]

21 "І, галоўнае, далечы, роўных якім не знайсці на зямлі" (Karatkievich 1990: 392).

22 "Давайце цяпер пяройдзем да вёскі, хаты, чалавека. Толькі я хачу папярэдзіць вас, што гэта будзе размова хутчэй этнаграфічная, што многа чаго змянілася, што вопратку народную носяць не паўсюль, а толькі месцамі, астраўкамі на Палессі, Гродзеншчыне, Прыдняпроўі, што гаспадыні самі цяпер пякуць хлеб нячаста і г. д.
Размова пойдзе пра тыповае, пра тое, што розніць побыт беларуса ад побыту, скажам, грузіна ці ўкраінца" (Karatkyevich 1990: 392).

It's a curious construction: on the one hand, it is old customs (and costumes) that define Belarusians and make them distinct — on the other hand, this definition still holds even after those customs have long disappeared. The fleeting nature of such customs does not appear to be a problem: the Belarusian remains distinct from all other peoples, even in their absence. There is something beyond the ephemeral that preserves this distinctiveness — the ephemeral is an example of a deeper ontological order. The old Belarusian customs serve merely as evidence for something already presupposed: the inherent uniqueness of life within the various regions of the bison-shaped country, set apart from everything else in the world. There is something there that will always be different. In statements like these, we hear a mode of speaking that recurs whenever the narrator's descriptions turn to human life — especially when they address moments in history.

Such a moment in history is brought up later in the text, in a part that is a long meditation on the Belavezhskaya Pushcha national park. One of the fixed points around which that meditation revolves is a tower built in the 13th century in Kamyanyets, which through the centuries witnesses history coming into the forest again and again, embodied by different occupiers, armies, etc. But the tower, a human construction with a fixed, historical existence, bears witness to more: to the way in which the ahistorical forest is actually more powerful than the history going on in it. Still, the forest stands in solidarity with the sons of the country when history threatens them. As the text puts it:

> All this villainy, all this brazen robbery, was witnessed by the Kamyanets Tower. From it, the attacks of the Yotvingians and the Crusaders were repelled; it hosted royal government posts during the uprisings of Kościuszko and Kalinouski. The forest has always sheltered its sons (among them, partisans in the World War II) — sons of freedom.[23]

Nature is more powerful than history. The "sons of freedom" — freedom being a category of history — are synonymous with the "sons of the Pushcha" — of the Belarusian forest, i.e. of nature. From this point of view, the three points in history referenced in this passage (which

23 "Усё гэта свінства, увесь гэты беспардонны разбой бачыла Камянецкая вежа. З яе адбівалі атакі ятвягаў і крыжаносцаў, на ёй былі царскія ўрадавыя пасты ў часе паўстанняў Касцюшкі і Каліноўскага. Пушча заўсёды хавала сваіх сыноў (між іншым, і партызан у Айчынную вайну), сыноў свабоды" (Karatkievich 1990: 435).

apparently all emblemize "freedom") become one: the Kościuszko uprising of 1794, the Kalinouski rebellion of 1863–1864, and the partisans of the 1940s. All of those historical actors are to be read as, to repeat it once more, "sons of the Pushcha" — their struggles for "freedom", which, of course, were highly different in character, highly specific to their respective historical contexts, become the same in front of the forest that gave birth to them, that hid them from their enemies. They become *expressions* of a deeper, underlying Belarusianness — their struggle for freedom is *ontologized* as the struggle of the forest itself. They fight *for* the forest — for Belarus. Therein lies the authenticity of their struggle — it expresses the deeper truth of what surrounds them, the truth of the bison on the map. Not only the smaller manifestations of human life — such as the foods and costumes of the people — but also major historical events that appear to originate *outside* of Belarus (the partition of Poland, the abolition of serfdom, or the German invasion of the Soviet Union) are, in the text, rooted in a deep, transhistorical national ontology. Everything is explained through its located-ness within Belarus — an all-encompassing condition that absorbs and redefines every event. Revolutions, rebellions, war — all are rendered as expressions of an underlying national essence. Here we encounter a clear echo of Fanon's point about the necessity of creating new national founding moments, and how this process works: such moments become *national* not by virtue of their historical content, but by being lifted out of history altogether — transformed into expressions of something a- or transhistorical.

This feature of the text becomes even more pronounced when the narrator gets into open conflict with other "narrators" of Belarusian history, with historians and ethnographers who also wrote about Belarus, its nature, and its people. In a prolonged reply to a short quote from the 1905 book *Rossiya. Polnoe geograficheckoe sobranie* (surely picked as an aim for attack also because of its title — "Russia. A full geographical collection") which talks about the "tenderness"[24] of the Belarusians' *nature* at great length, Karatkievich's narrator builds a counter-narrative: the nature of the Belarusian is not correctly understood when read as soft, it actually follows a different formula: "being a friendly host to friends"[25] — i.e., not to enemies. The country shaped like a bison can defend itself. This point is reinforced through episodes from — once again — the Kalinouski uprising and the partisan struggle, presented to the reader in the ironic tone typical of the short narrative vignettes embedded within the text's more essayistic

24 "рахманасць натуры" (Karatkievich 1990: 452).

25 "гасціннасць добрага да добрых" (Karatkievich 1990: 452).

sections. I won't delve into the specifics of these episodes here; more important is the way the text makes clear that any ethnography attempting to understand Belarusians under the label of "Russi". is bound to fail. Such an approach cannot grasp the Belarusians' true nature. As the text puts it:

> Our land's enemies often counted on this "tenderness of nature". Enemies — because there have been quite a few of them throughout our history. [...] Cross the border, and your adversary will be a fearsome man. Fearsome especially when his anger is calm and calculated.[26]

It is already notable that the text, after mentioning "Russia", immediately shifts to discussing "enemies". Even more significant, however, is how it does so: it refers to enemies of the *Our lands*, thereby echoing the earlier chapter titled "My Belarusian Land". The attackers are not framed as enemies of a people, but of something broader — an expansive, almost sacred territorial entity that precedes and encompasses the nation itself. Belarus is not merely a space that gives birth to freedom fighters and shelters them — it is also a space that has enemies beyond its borders. These are not adversaries of a specific political regime or the result of a particular historical moment; they are enemies of the *Belarusian lands* themselves — metaphysical enemies. Here, we see another layer of ontologization: Belarus not only embodies a distinct way of life and a naturalized struggle for freedom, it is also cast as a site of perennial conflict, shaped by an external evil that stands in essential opposition to the life Belarus represents. The text seeks to construct Belarus as an all-encompassing ontological entity: everything within its borders is imbued with meaning by that entity, born of it, sustained by it. Within the borders of the BSSR, nothing else can truly exist — because all existence there is, by definition, Belarusian. This is the text's fundamental postulate: Belarus becomes the master signifier, the total horizon — there is nothing beyond its reach.

To return to the beginning of this chapter: this is what the narrator sees in a place marked by destruction, where the connection to the past has been severed by war. It is through his act of recollection — through his monologue — that the place is once again identified as

26 "На гэтую "рахманасць натуры" часта разлічваў вораг нашай зямлі. Ворагі, бо іх за нашу гісторыю бывала досыць. [...] Пяройдзеш мяжу — і тваім ворагам будзе страшны чалавек. Страшны асабліва тады, калі гнеў яго спакойны і разлічаны" (Karatkievich 1990: 452).

Belarus. He instructs the present in what it is; he assumes the burden of telling a country about its own nature at a time when that nature is no longer self-evident — obscured by the trauma of war and the erosion of traditional customs in post-war life. Yet, he does not seek to recreate those customs, nor does he need to. The nature of Belarus, in his view, cannot be erased. It endures — ontologically given, not historically constructed. *Everything existing in Belarus becomes an example for the existence of Belarus.*

This, again, communicates with the critical mode of ontologization Fanon points out: it is a willing-into-life of a subjectivity that can just exist without reference to being willed into life. In the following, final chapter, I will examine how the concrete historical present of *Zyamlya* — the post-war Soviet Union — figures within this existential construction: how this present, with all its features, landmarks, and, most importantly, its myths, is reimagined as belonging to Belarus rather than to the Soviet Union. In doing so, I aim to explore how the text manages to hold together the seemingly contradictory elements of its narrative, and how this tension might be productively resolved.

Soviet History as Belarusian Existence: Critical Ontologization

Zyamlya not only speaks of uprisings from earlier centuries and the loss of lives in World War II. It is also not only a text about forests, lakes, and bisons. In addition to that, it confronts its own present, the 1970s, in which Belarus is a heavily industrialized Soviet republic. These confrontations with the present and their relation to the ontologized nature of the Belarusian space discussed above will be the focus of this chapter.

We meet today's Belarus mainly in several small chapters dedicated to a number of Belarusian cities: Minsk, Polatsk, Vitsyebsk, Mahiljou, Homiel, Brest, and Hrodna. Each chapter presents the respective city's history, shows how that history is represented in the city's streets and, thereby, locates the city within the context of the BSSR. For Minsk, the biggest of them, this may look like the following:

> And, right in the center, there stands a small wooden house. This is the museum of the 1st Congress of the R[ussian] S[ocial] D[emocratic] L[abour] P[arty], that was held here in 1898. The significance of this congress, at which the RSDLP was founded, is clear to everyone. Here was born the very name of that force which seven years later resulted

in the revolution of 1905, and in 1917, nineteen years later, overthrew Tsarism — that force which created the state in which we now live.
The USSR.
The BSSR.[27]

The climactic structure of the above statement is indicative for the place the Soviet Union holds in *Zyamlya*. The text — while being *far* from explicitly anti-Soviet — still establishes a hierarchical relationship between the all-encompassing Belarus and the Soviet project. Concretely, Minsk is made into the place from which the October revolution started — it is where the revolution was *born*, where thereby "the state we live in today" was *born*. One can see the parallel structure between this statement and the one made above concerning the rebels of 1794 and 1863–1864: in 1898, another revolution was born in Belarus, the RSDLP becomes another group of "sons of freedom" conceived in and by Belarus. This effect is made even stronger by the naming of the state born in that small wooden house in central Minsk: we get two names for that country, "USSR" and "BSSR", and the BSSR gets the place in the end of the cadence; it is the culmination, it is what all of this is really about. The movement enacted by the text here is a circular one, always moving around Belarus: in Belarus, a revolution was born, this gave rise to the Soviet Union, and out of that, Belarus is reborn as the BSSR. The BSSR is *the point* of the Soviet Union; and it is not only that — it is equally the place of its origin. The USSR in such a reading becomes another *example* for the existential role that Belarus plays for everything; even the Soviet Union's existence is rooted in the way deeper ontological status of Belarus.

Another example of this centering of Soviet history around Belarus appears in the chapter dedicated to Brest. Here, the narration encounters one of the main myths of the Soviet discourse on Belarus: that of the defence of the Brest fortress during World War II. Again, we are confronted with the rootedness of a special kind of fighting spirit in the Belarusian lands — the defence is positioned as happening *against* what was actually a not-so-well organized Soviet war effort, as demonstrating something peculiar about "our people":

27 "І, у самым цэнтры, невялічкі драўляны дамок. Гэта музей І з'езда РСДРП, які адбыўся тут у 1898 годзе. Значэнне гэтага з'езда, які заснаваў РСДРП, ясна ўсім. Тут нарадзілася самае імя той сілы, якая сямю гадамі пазней вылілася ў рэвалюцыю 1905 года, а ў 1917 годзе, праз дзевятнаццаць год, зрынула царызм, той сілы, якая стварыла дзяржаву, у якой мы зараз жывём.
СССР.
БССР" (Karatkievich 1990: 461).

> By all divine and human laws [...] it was impossible not only to hold out here, but even to organize any kind of sustained resistance. Any cadre officer, any military theorist would have said that this was "unnatural resistance", "unrealistic", "impossible".
> Yet, our people stood firm.[28]

The resistance spirit of the Brest fortress — it was organized against what any cadre officer, any *professional* would have thought, such a deed would have been seen by him as being *against nature*. But the nature of the people in the fortress is the one claimed earlier by the narrator as the nature of the people in the forest — it is identified with the struggle of the Belarusian lands, it expresses a *different nature*, differing from the one any professional could describe (as already evidenced by the failed attempt of the professional ethnographers working on the *Rossiya* collection to properly describe Belarusian nature). The defence of the Brest fortress to *Zyamlya* is not an expression of the Soviet heroism of the defenders, no — instead, it expresses the specific, localized, ontological fighting spirit of the Belarusian people. In statements like this, the full critical power of the ontologization plays out: a moment in history is provided with a second meaning, the text's own monological way of speaking forces the way more powerful monologue of Soviet history into a dialogue — at least, in the reader's head. By making Belarus the essence of itself, Soviet historical discourse is de-essentialized. With the Brest Fortress, as with the earlier-mentioned history of the partisans, the 1863–1864 rebels, and others, moments that could be adapted to a Soviet historical narrative are instead reframed as expressions of a deeper ontological category: Belarusian history. Herein lies the critical potential of the text: the narrator's authoritarian narrative posture paradoxically opens an anti-authoritarian way of thinking. He is bold enough to speak freely of the past, using the blank slate presented after World War II to write a new essence for himself and for all those he identifies as his equals — his brothers and sisters by nationality. Within this lies a powerful possibility: if he can do so, then others can — and indeed should — do the same.

28 "Па ўсіх законах божых і чалавечых [...] тут немагчыма было не тое што выстаяць, але і арганізаваць больш-менш працяглае супраціўленне. Любы кадравік, любы ваенны тэарэтык сказаў бы, што гэта "супраціўна натуры", "нерэальна", "немажліва".
Гэтыя нашы людзі стаялі" (Karatkievich 1990: 475–476).

Conclusion

To return finally to the opening words of the narration in the prologue of *Zyamlya*, and to clarify some of the slippage present there: the identity between the narrator and his listeners operates in two directions because of the critical dynamism of the text that follows. By identifying himself with his audience, the narrator indeed establishes his authority over them — but, simultaneously, he also empowers them to do what he does: to write their own essence. The book confronts its readers not only with a story of their own nature but also with a mode of writing that nature; it posits the possibility of writing one's own past. And this — and herein lies the true power of the text — is presented as a tilted image, a double image where one picture momentarily shifts into the other: the readers of *Zyamlya* are both narrators and narrated objects within the text. As narrators, they are granted the power to essentialize themselves, to forge a new ontology that transcends their present. As narrated objects, they are already identified with a heroic past — a defiant, all-encompassing essence that renders them special, strong, and independent. On the one hand, they are *the same as the 1863 rebels* or *the defenders of the Brest Fortress* — but on the other hand, they are also *powerful narrators capable of inventing events like the 1863 uprising or the Brest Fortress defence*. They are identified with both sides of the narrative structure: the authoritarian narrative voice and the authoritative historical figures it envisions. Both represent the readers' essence, both constitute their being. This marks the secret of *Zyamlya*'s critical ontology: its readers are empowered to judge their present precisely because they are understood as the essential creators of it — they are allowed to think beyond it. At the moment of writing the essay, an equilibrium between the Soviet and the national appears to be realized — but this balance need not endure indefinitely. Ultimately, any future must prove itself to the nation's children: will they accept it or reject it? If they reject it, they hold the right to overthrow their present, thus creating yet another example of their nation's all-encompassing fighting spirit.

To return to Frantz Fanon's concept of national culture as the "whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (Fanon 1967: 188), *Zyamlya* embodies both sides of that definition: the *effort* of creating such a culture in the present — and the need to describe the *existence* of a people. Its impetus is rooted in the present, it uses the ontologization of a past for critical intervention. *Zyamlya* is a critical national text of the post-war world — employing an authoritarian mode of speech to

unlock a critical potential that empowers its listeners. This approach may be symptomatic of a lowered horizon regarding actual possibilities for freedom — the contradiction between *critique* and *ontologization* requires a certain authoritarian force to be sustained. Yet, it still offers a framework for thinking forward, and therein lies its enduring potential for productive interpretation. As Karatkievich concludes his essay:

> But if you, my dear girls and boys, after reading this book, wish to walk the paths of our Belarus, our land beneath white stork wings, to wander through these dense oak groves, to sail along these full rivers — then I will consider my work done. I will be happy.
> May you be happy as well.[29]

The hope expressed in those sentences might be a fragile one — but at least it has found a ground on which to stand.

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29 "Але калі вам, дарагія мае дзяўчаты і хлопцы, захацелася пасля прачытанай кнігі прайсці па шляхах нашай Беларусі, нашай зямлі пад белымі буслінымі крыламі, пахадзіць гэтымі дрымучымі дубровамі, праплысці гэтымі поўнымі рэкамі, — буду лічыць, што работа мая зроблена. Буду шчаслівы.
Бывайце ж шчаслівыя і вы" (Karatkievich 1990: 570).

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